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(Plus, Below: Karl Marx, Political Indifferentism, 1873)

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On Authority

A number of Socialists have latterly launched a regular crusade against what they call the *principle of authority*. It suffices to tell them that this or that act is *authoritarian* for it to be condemned. This summary mode of procedure is being abused to such an extent that it has become necessary to look into the matter somewhat more closely.

Authority, in the sense in which the word is used here, means: the imposition of the will of another upon ours; on the other hand, authority presupposes subordination. Now, since these two words sound bad, and the relationship which they represent is disagreeable to the subordinated party, the question is to ascertain whether there is any way of dispensing with it, whether — given the conditions of present-day society — we could not create another social system, in which this authority would be given no scope any longer, and would consequently have to disappear.

On examining the economic, industrial and agricultural conditions which form the basis of present-day bourgeois society, we find that they tend more and more to replace isolated action by combined action of individuals. Modern industry, with its big factories and mills, where hundreds of workers supervise complicated machines driven by steam, has superseded the small workshops of the separate producers; the carriages and wagons of the highways have become substituted by railway trains, just as the small schooners and sailing feluccas have been by steam-boats. Even agriculture falls increasingly under the dominion of the machine and of steam,

which slowly but relentlessly put in the place of the small proprietors big capitalists, who with the aid of hired workers cultivate vast stretches of land.

Everywhere combined action, the complication of processes dependent upon each other, displaces independent action by individuals. But whoever mentions combined action speaks of organisation; now, is it possible to have organisation without authority?

Supposing a social revolution dethroned the capitalists, who now exercise their authority over the production and circulation of wealth. Supposing, to adopt entirely the point of view of the anti-authoritarians, that the land and the instruments of labour had become the collective property of the workers who use them. Will authority have disappeared, or will it only have changed its form? Let us see.

Let us take by way of example a cotton spinning mill. The cotton must pass through at least six successive operations before it is reduced to the state of thread, and these operations take place for the most part in different rooms. Furthermore, keeping the machines going requires an engineer to look after the steam engine, mechanics to make the current repairs, and many other labourers whose business it is to transfer the products from one room to another, and so forth. All these workers, men, women and children, are obliged to begin and finish their work at the hours fixed by the authority of the steam, which cares nothing for individual autonomy. The workers must, therefore, first come to an understanding on the hours of work; and these hours, once they are fixed, must be observed by all, without any exception. Thereafter particular questions arise in each room and at every moment concerning the mode of production, distribution of material, etc., which must be settled by decision of a delegate placed at the head of each branch of labour or, if possible, by a majority vote, the will of the single individual will always have to subordinate itself, which means that questions are settled in an authoritarian way. The automatic machinery of the big factory is much more despotic than the small capitalists who employ workers ever have been. At least with regard to the hours of work one may write upon the portals of these factories: *Lasciate ogni autonomia, voi che entrate!* [Leave, ye that enter in, all autonomy behind!]

If man, by dint of his knowledge and inventive genius, has subdued the forces of nature, the latter avenge themselves upon him by subjecting him, in so far as he employs them, to a veritable despotism independent of all social organisation. Wanting to abolish authority in large-scale industry is tantamount to wanting to abolish industry itself, to destroy the power loom in order to return to the spinning wheel.

Let us take another example — the railway. Here too the co-operation of an infinite number of individuals is absolutely necessary, and this co-operation must be practised during precisely fixed hours so that no accidents may happen. Here, too, the first condition of the job is a dominant will that settles all subordinate questions, whether this will is represented by a single delegate or a committee charged with the execution of the resolutions of the majority of persons interested. In either case there is a very pronounced authority. Moreover, what would happen to the first train dispatched if the authority of the railway employees over the Hon. passengers were abolished?

But the necessity of authority, and of imperious authority at that, will nowhere be found more evident than on board a ship on the high seas. There, in time of danger, the lives of all depend on the instantaneous and absolute obedience of all to the will of one.

When I submitted arguments like these to the most rabid anti-authoritarians, the only answer they were able to give me was the following: Yes, that's true, but there it is not the case of authority which we confer on our delegates, *but of a commission entrusted!* These gentlemen think that when they have changed the names of things they have changed the things themselves. This is how these profound thinkers mock at the whole world.

We have thus seen that, on the one hand, a certain authority, no matter how delegated, and, on the other hand, a certain subordination, are things which, independently of all social organisation, are imposed upon us together with the material conditions under which we produce and make products circulate.

We have seen, besides, that the material conditions of production and circulation inevitably develop with large-scale industry and large-scale agriculture, and increasingly tend to enlarge the scope of this authority. Hence it is absurd to speak of the principle of authority as being absolutely evil, and of the principle of autonomy as being absolutely good. Authority and autonomy are relative things whose spheres vary with the various phases of the development of society. If the autonomists confined themselves to saying that the social organisation of the future would restrict authority solely to the limits within which the conditions of production render it inevitable, we could understand each other; but they are blind to all facts that make the thing necessary and they passionately fight the world.

Why do the anti-authoritarians not confine themselves to crying out against political authority, the state? All Socialists are agreed that the political state, and with it political authority, will disappear as a result of the coming social revolution,

that is, that public functions will lose their political character and will be transformed into the simple administrative functions of watching over the true interests of society. But the anti-authoritarians demand that the political state be abolished at one stroke, even before the social conditions that gave birth to it have been destroyed. They demand that the first act of the social revolution shall be the abolition of authority. Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon — authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror which its arms inspire in the reactionists. Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?

Therefore, either one of two things: either the anti-authoritarians don't know what they're talking about, in which case they are creating nothing but confusion; or they do know, and in that case they are betraying the movement of the proletariat. In either case they serve the reaction.

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Political Indifferentism

“The working class must not constitute itself a political party; it must not, under any pretext, engage in political action, for to combat the state is to recognize the state: and this is contrary to eternal principles. Workers must not go on strike; for to struggle to increase one's wages or to prevent their decrease is like recognizing wages: and this is contrary to the eternal principles of the emancipation of the working class!

“If in the political struggle against the bourgeois state the workers succeed only in extracting concessions, then they are guilty of compromise; and this is contrary to eternal principles. All peaceful movements, such as those in which English and American workers have the bad habit of engaging, are therefore to be despised. Workers must not struggle to establish a legal limit to the working day, because this is to compromise with the masters, who can then only exploit them for ten or twelve hours, instead of fourteen or sixteen. They must not even exert themselves in order legally to prohibit the employment in factories of children under the age of ten, because by such means they do not bring to an end the exploitation of children over ten: they thus commit a new compromise, which stains the purity of the eternal principles.

“Workers should even less desire that, as happens in the United States of America, the state whose budget is swollen by what is taken from the working class should be obliged to give primary education to the workers' children; for primary education is not complete education. It is better that working men and working women should not be able to read or write or do sums than that they should receive education from a teacher in a school run by the state. It is far better that ignorance and a working day of sixteen hours should debase the working classes than that eternal principles should be violated.

"If the political struggle of the working class assumes violent forms and if the workers replace the dictatorship of the bourgeois class with their own revolutionary dictatorship, then they are guilty of the terrible crime of lèse-principe; for, in order to satisfy their miserable profane daily needs and to crush the resistance of the bourgeois class, they, instead of laying down their arms and abolishing the state, give to the state a revolutionary and transitory form. Workers must not even form single unions for every trade, for by so doing they perpetuate the social division of labour as they find it in bourgeois society; this division, which fragments the working class, is the true basis of their present enslavement.

"In a word, the workers should cross their arms and stop wasting time in political and economic movements. These movements can never produce anything more than short-term results. As truly religious men they should scorn daily needs and cry out with voices full of faith: "May our class be crucified, may our race perish, but let the eternal principles remain immaculate! As pious Christians they must believe the words of their pastor, despise the good things of this world and think only of going to Paradise. In place of Paradise read the social liquidation which is going to take place one day in some or other corner of the globe, no one knows how, or through whom, and the mystification is identical in all respects.

"In expectation, therefore, of this famous social liquidation, the working class must behave itself in a respectable manner, like a flock of well-fed sheep; it must leave the government in peace, fear the police, respect the law and offer itself up uncomplaining as cannon-fodder.

"In the practical life of every day, workers must be the most obedient servants of the state; but in their hearts they must protest energetically against its very existence, and give proof of their profound theoretical contempt for it by acquiring and reading literary treatises on its abolition; they must further scrupulously refrain from putting up any resistance to the capitalist regime apart from declamations on the society of the future, when this hated regime will have ceased to exist!"

It cannot be denied that if the apostles of political indifferentism were to express themselves with such clarity, the working class would make short shrift of them and would resent being insulted by these doctrinaire bourgeois and displaced gentlemen, who are so stupid or so naive as to attempt to deny to the working class any real means of struggle. For all arms with which to fight must be drawn from society as it is and the fatal conditions of this struggle have the misfortune of not being easily adapted to the idealistic fantasies which these doctors in *social science* have exalted as divinities, under the names of *Freedom, Autonomy, Anarchy*. However the working-class movement is today so powerful that these philanthropic

sectarians dare not repeat for the economic struggle those *great truths* which they used incessantly to proclaim on the subject of the political struggle. They are simply too cowardly to apply them any longer to strikes, combinations, single-craft unions, laws on the labour of women and children, on the limitation of the working day etc., etc.

Now let us see whether they are still able to be brought back to the good old traditions, to modesty, good faith and eternal principles.

The first socialists (Fourier, Owen, Saint-Simon, etc.), since social conditions were not sufficiently developed to allow the working class to constitute itself as a militant class, were necessarily obliged to limit themselves to dreams about the *model society* of the future and were led thus to condemn all the attempts such as strikes, combinations or political movements set in train by the workers to improve their lot. But while we cannot repudiate these patriarchs of socialism, just as chemists cannot repudiate their forebears the alchemists, we must at least avoid falling back into their mistakes, which, if we were to commit them, would be inexcusable. Later, however, in 1839, when the political and economic struggle of the working class in England had taken on a fairly marked character, Bray, one of Owen's disciples and one of the many who long before Proudhon hit upon the idea of *mutualism*, published a book entitled *Labour's Wrongs and Labour's Remedy*.

In his chapter on the inefficacy of *all the remedies aimed for by the present struggle*, he makes a savage critique of all the activities, political or economic, of the English working class, condemns the political movement, strikes, the limitation of the working day, the restriction of the work of women and children in factories, since all this -- or so he claims -- instead of taking us out of the present state of society, keeps us there and does nothing but render the antagonisms more intense.

This brings us to the oracle of these doctors of social science, M. Proudhon. While the master had the courage to declare himself energetically opposed to all economic activities (combinations, strikes, etc.) which contradicted his redemptive theories of *mutualism*, at the same time through his writings and personal participation, he encouraged the working-class movement, and his disciples do not dare to declare themselves openly against it. As early as 1847, when the master's great work, *The System of Economic Contradictions*, had just appeared, I refuted his sophisms against the working-class movement. [2] None the less in 1864, after the *loi Ollivier*, which granted the French workers, in a very restrictive fashion, a certain right of combination, Proudhon returned to the charge in a book, *The Political Capacities of the Working Classes*, published a few days after his death.

The master's strictures were so much to the taste of the bourgeoisie that *The Times*, on the occasion of the great tailors' strike in London in 1866, did Proudhon the honour of translating him and of condemning the strikes with the master's very words. Here are some selections.

The miners of Rive-de-Gier went on strike; the soldiers were called in to bring them back to reason. Proudhon cries, 'The authority which had the miners of Rive-de-Gier shot acted disgracefully. But it was acting like Brutus of old caught between his paternal love and his consular duty: it was necessary to sacrifice his sons to save the Republic. Brutus did not hesitate, and posterity dare not condemn him.' [3] In all the memory of the proletariat there is no record of a bourgeois who has hesitated to sacrifice his workers to save his interests. What Brutuses the bourgeois must then be!

'Well, no: there is no right of combination, just as there is no right to defraud or steal or to commit incest or adultery.' [4] There is however all too clearly a right to stupidity.

What then are the eternal principles, in whose name the master fulminates his mystic anathema?

First eternal principle: 'Wage rates determine the price of commodities.'

Even those who have no knowledge of political economy and who are unaware that the great bourgeois economist Ricardo in his *Principles of Political Economy*, published in 1817, has refuted this long-standing error once and for all, are however aware of the remarkable fact that British industry can sell its products at a price far lower than that of any other nation, although wages are relatively higher in England than in any other European country.

Second eternal principle: 'The law which authorizes combinations is highly anti-juridical, anti-economic and contrary to any society and order.' [5] In a word 'contrary to the economic *right* of free competition'.

If the master had been a little less chauvinistic, he might have asked himself how it happened that forty years ago a law, thus contrary to the *economic rights of free competition*, was promulgated in England; and that as industry develops, and alongside it *free competition*, this law -- so contrary to *any society and order* -- imposes itself as a necessity even to bourgeois states themselves. He might perhaps have discovered that this right (with capital R) exists only in the *Economic Manuals* written by the Brothers Ignoramus of bourgeois political economy, in which

manuals are contained such pearls as this: 'Property is the fruit of labour' ('of the labour', they neglect to add, 'of others').

Third eternal principle: 'Therefore, under the pretext of raising the working class from its condition of so-called social inferiority, it will be necessary to start by denouncing a whole class of citizens, the class of bosses, entrepreneurs, masters and bourgeois; it will be necessary to rouse workers' democracy to despise and to hate these unworthy members of the middle class; it will be necessary to prefer mercantile and industrial war to legal repression, and class antagonism to the state police.' [6]

The master, in order to prevent the working class from escaping from its so-called *social inferiority*, condemns the combinations that constitute the working class as a class antagonistic to the respectable *category of masters, entrepreneurs and bourgeois*, who for their part certainly prefer, as does Proudhon, *the state police to class antagonism*. To avoid any offence to this respectable class, the good M. Proudhon recommends to the workers (up to the coming of the *mutualist regime*, and despite its serious disadvantages) freedom or competition, our 'only guarantee'. [7]

The master preached indifference in matters of economics -- *so as to protect bourgeois freedom or competition*, our only guarantee. His disciples preach indifference in matters of politics -- so as to protect bourgeois freedom, their only guarantee. If the early Christians, who also preached political indifferentism, needed an emperor's arm to transform themselves from oppressed into oppressors, so the modern apostles of political indifferentism do not believe that their own eternal principles impose on them abstinence from worldly pleasures and the temporal privileges of bourgeois society. However we must recognize that they display a stoicism worthy of the early Christian martyrs in supporting those fourteen or sixteen working hours such as overburden the workers in the factories.

Footnotes

2. P. J. Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques, ou philosophie de la misère* (1846). This was the work that Marx replied to with his book *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). Return to Text

3. *De la Capacité politique des classes ouvrières*, Paris, 1865, p. 413. To give Proudhon his due, he was not so much justifying the actions of the French authorities as exposing the 'contradictions' he saw as an inevitable evil of the present social order.

4. *ibid.*, p. 421.

5. *ibid.*, p. 424.

6. *ibid.*, p. 426.

7. *ibid.*, p. 422.

From: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1873/01/indifferentism.htm>

Course: Lenin's The State and Revolution

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